

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 393 121

CS 215 275

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TITLE Teacher's Resource Guide for Student Expressions
Anthology. Elementary.
INSTITUTION Northland School Div. No. 61, Peace River
(Alberta).
REPORT NO ISBN-1-55036-430-8
PUB DATE 94
NOTE 31p.; For the related Anthology, see CS 215 274; for
other documents in this series covering other grade
levels, see CS 215 270-273.
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For
Teacher) (052) -- Reports - Descriptive (141) --
Collected Works - General (020)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Elementary Education; Foreign Countries; *Language
Arts; Reflective Teaching; *Teacher Attitudes;
Teacher Role; *Teacher Student Relationship; *Writing
Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Alberta

ABSTRACT

Reflecting on the partnership that exists between teachers and students, this resource guide provides a glimpse into the experiences of educators who reflect on their own teaching and learning about writing. The resource guide is part of the "Student Expressions" series, whose aim is to provide a forum for celebrating the writing of students and teachers and provide resource materials which can be coordinated with the Alberta Education Language Arts Program of Studies (Canada) and the elementary, junior high, and senior high school curriculum guides. Essays in the resource guide, which focus almost exclusively on writing instruction, are: "Reflections from a Primary Teacher" (Patti C. P. Fehr); "Reflections from an Elementary Teacher/Principal" (Wesley Oginski); and "Reflections from an Upper Elementary School Teacher" (Douglas Ross).
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TEACHER'S RESOURCE GUIDE FOR STUDENT EXPRESSIONS ANTHOLOGY

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Teacher's Resource Guide for
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Published by Northland School Division No. 61, Bag 1400, 9809 - 77 Ave.,
Peace River, AB T8S 1V2

ISBN: 1-55036-430-8

Design, typesetting, and production coordination by Nortext,
P.O. Box 8, Iqaluit, N.W.T. X0A 0H0

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TEACHER'S
RESOURCE
GUIDE
FOR
STUDENT
EXPRESSIONS
ANTHOLOGY
(Elementary)



Northland

SCHOOL DIVISION
No. 61

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INTRODUCTION

The **Student Expressions** series is composed of student anthologies and teacher's resource guides at the elementary, junior and senior high levels. The purpose of the series is:

- to provide a forum for celebrating the writing of our students and our teachers;
- to provide resource materials which can be coordinated with the Alberta Education Language Arts Program of Studies and the curriculum guides: Language Learning Elementary School, Language Arts Junior High School, and Language Arts Senior High School.

The *student anthologies* provide a glimpse into the young person's world of thoughts, ideas, hopes, dreams and concerns. The student **voice** is central to the anthologies. Hence writing selections are made accessible to educators so that a bridge of understanding can continue to be built between our young people and the adults who teach them.

The *teacher's resource guides* provide a glimpse into the experiences of educators who reflect on their own teaching and learning about writing. Their unique insights offer the reader an opportunity to reflect upon the partnership that exists between our teachers and students.

These materials can be adapted to suit local needs. It is our hope that these resources provide inspiration and support to strengthen rapport among teachers, students, schools and communities.

Together, the student anthologies and teacher's guides are offered as gifts from *many* hearts!

C.K. Amber



CHAPTER 1

Reflections from a Primary Teacher

PATTI C.P. FEHR

When I began teaching my grade one and two students in September, I was very concerned that I would expect too much from them. After teaching junior and senior high school language arts for 10 years, I was worried about making the mental adjustments to suit this elementary level. However, I felt that I should go in expecting a lot and settle for less later. To my relief and delight this approach seems to have worked: I didn't have to settle for less.

My other concern in teaching at the primary level was that I would actually be teaching children how to read and write from scratch, without the safety net which junior and senior high school teachers have. I would be my students' first language arts teacher, so their success or failure to read and write could not be blamed on what they hadn't learned last year.

I shouldn't have worried; students learn at their own pace. The child who hasn't read five words in four months one day amazes you by reading a complete sentence to the entire class. The disinterested writer who has begrudgingly offered only a two-sentence story in his journal one day presents you with a one page story about what it is like to meet a giant and go to lunch with him. Once children realize that these funny scratches called letters can be used to form sounds and words to communicate, they are empowered. When this occurs their language abilities improve quickly and dramatically.

The following discussion is based mainly on one teacher's observations and experimentations in teaching language arts at the primary level. It is by no means the be-all and the end-all on this subject. What works well for one teacher may not work as well or may work even better for another teacher.



LANGUAGE LEARNING AT THE EARLY CHILDHOOD SERVICES (ECS) LEVEL

Although I do not teach Early Childhood Services (ECS), I chat with the ECS teacher several times a week. We often compare notes or simply bounce ideas off one another. Since the ECS students (who range in age from four to five) are just learning to recognize the alphabet, all of their storytelling is done orally or through hand-drawn pictures. As is the case with grade one and two students, these children enjoy creating visual scenes from their everyday lives and explaining the events in the pictures.

All of the ECS students have *picture journals* in which they record, through drawings, what happened that day. They also make picture booklets based on seasonal theme units. They are able to discuss their personal drawings as well as photographs and pictures presented to the class by their teacher. Thus, although they are not actually writing, they are beginning the writing process.

WHAT DO GRADE ONE AND TWO STUDENTS WRITE ABOUT?

Whether my grade one and two students are telling or writing stories, I have noticed these generally fit into one of the following categories:

- A recounting of something which happened to them, someone in their family, or a friend. The story is usually told as a first-person narrative.
- A fairytale or fantastic story in which people have super powers: casting spells on others; killing evil people, beings, and animals; meeting giants, etc.



- A story about a humanized animal similar to those found in the Walt Disney movies they love to watch.
- A response to a specific assignment I have given them. For example, when we did a unit on puppets, each grade two student made a sock puppet and wrote a short piece pretending to be that puppet.

The common thread in all of these stories is that they are about things the students have experienced, heard about from a reliable source, watched on television, or read about. These young writers are unable to tell a story about something outside their experiences. An assignment like "pretend you are a teenager going out on your first date" is of no interest to them. They will not write about something which does not pique their interest.

SAMPLES OF GRADE ONE AND TWO WRITING

In one assignment I asked my grade two students to write a fairy tale. They were allowed to bestow any special powers, be they human or animal, on their main character. Here's what Katie, Timothy, and Karmon wrote.

Katie: Draft One

a really magic pony

One upon a time there had a beutiful Pony that had Lots of magik. She can change person. She can change into a frog. the end

Katie: Draft Two

a really Magic Pony

Once upon a time there was a beautiful Pony that had lots of magic and her name was Rachelle. She can change a person into a frog and the frog ran away. She can make a bear into a trol. the end



Katie: Draft Three

A Really Magic Pony

Once upon a time there was a beautiful pony that had lots of magic and her name was Rachelle. She could change a person into a frog and the frog ran away. She can make a bear into a troll and the troll ran away. She can make a witch into a bat and the bat flew away. She ran into a crystal (*my help with spelling*) palace. She meet a Magic Prince and got married. the end

Timothy: Drafts One and Two Combined

Once upon a time there was a princess named Petranella.* She met a prince named Jack. They fell deeply in Love. Petranella was a witchey person. Jack was a nice friendly person. Petranella was mean to Jack, but Jack was still nice to Petranella. and then they got a divorce, then Petranella got real poor. Jack got real rich.

The End

*The name, Petronella, was written on the chalkboard. It was taken from a story which we had just read.

Karmon: Draft Two

(Draft One was thrown out by Karmon.)

Once upon a time there was a pony named Katie and she danced and danced until a wicked witch came to hre house and fed her an apple I was poison and she fell on the floor She was dead Only if a Handsome Man came and kissed her would break the spell the hahsun Man kiss her.

To improve their stories the students did several drafts for this assignment. They added details, corrected spelling, fixed verb tenses, etc. They had about two weeks between the prewriting stage and completion of the final draft. By the end of this time all of the grade two students had written at least two drafts.

Some assignments take weeks whereas others need only two or three classes to produce great results. After reading *The Mitten* to a group of four students, I asked them to write a winter story of their own. The following are Katie's early drafts.

Katie: Draft One

The Scrunch

Once a mouse drop her mitten and she couldn't find it. then She went home then a little frog found it and put it on and said this mitten is to small then she put it back. then a cat found it and put it on and said this mitten is to small and she put it back. then a bear found it and he trid to put it on and then he put it back and a mouse trid this mitten on and he said just right then he took it home
the end

Katie: Draft Two

The Scrunch

Once a mouse dropped her mitten and she couldn't find it. Then he went home. Then a little frog found it and put it on and said this mitten is too small Then he put it back. Then a cat found it and put it on and said this mitten is small and she put it back. Then a bear found it and he tride it on and he said thismitten is too too small then he put it back. Then a mouse trid it on and he said this mitten is just righth. then he went home
the end

Katie spent only two classes on *The Scrunch*, since she liked her second draft the way it was.

Then there are those tidbits of writing that just seem to appear out of nowhere when you casually tell a student to "write something in your journal." This was the case with Ashley, a grade one student who wrote about Naughty the cat.



Ashley: Draft One

Naughty

My name is notty I am a cat we can play ball if you want or we can
play cars My mom name is Penny. I am two month old this is me I am
bad. You dot want to play ball or cars or we can play a game spit spit
spit I am bad bad bad
good bey

Although Ashley asked me to write the words *naughty* and *months* for her, all the other spellings are her own. For a five year old she is quite capable. If you read between the lines it's not hard to tell who *naughty* really is.

Since we often ask students to write stories around holiday themes, I'd like to share with you a final sample of student writing. After spending a week working on an art project related to St. Patrick's Day, and discussing typical Irish beliefs about luck, I asked my grade one and two students to write a story about "My Pot of Gold." I listed a number of key words (leprechaun, luck, rainbow, etc.) on the chalkboard, and told them that they had one class in which to write their stories.

I was surprised and delighted by the results. Even my most hesitant grade one student wrote three sentences. (This was a major feat believe me!) The grade twos wrote stories which had complete beginnings, middles, and endings, containing colourful characters and lots of action. Here is Jay's story which is typical of their work. He wrote this rough draft (in about 20 minutes) without any assistance from me.



Jay: Draft One

My Pot of Gold Story

Once upon a time there was a pt of gold. under a rainbow. the next day a leprickon went out for a walk. he spotted the gold. he went rily close. then warm he jumpd into the pot of gold. then he ran as fast as he could. Whil he was runing a tiger was saching. then the lepracaun soped. ten whith a little snap of her fingers he was none. the end

I enjoyed Jay's story because it invites the reader to go on a walk with a leprechaun. It is easy to imagine him spying the pot of gold, peeking in, and then wham, hopping in the pot. Jay also reveals the cunning of the leprechaun by having him notice the danger of the tiger and then use his magical powers to get away. This is very much in keeping with the Irish myths about leprechauns (e.g., their magical powers, great cunning, and love of secreting gold away). Jay's draft, even in its unpolished state, is a readable and enjoyable story.

RESPONDING TO STUDENT WRITING

How you respond to your students' writing depends largely on your teaching style and the rapport you have with your students. For example, some teachers make only positive comments on the first draft of a given assignment, whereas others include negative comments as well. Some conference orally with each student, while others address the whole class. Whatever your technique, it must be one you find comfortable and manageable.

When my grade one or two students hand in a piece of writing I skim it, find something I like about it, and then talk to the writer about it. I always say at least two positive things about the piece and then suggest ways it can be improved or expanded. I may ask the writer to clarify the setting: Where does your story take place? What did the forest look like? or expand on the characters: What is the name of your pony? or develop the plot more fully: What did the

what do next? Why? I try to make my students think of things that anyone would like to know after reading their stories and then have them go back and add these details. This helps to make them clarify what they have written.

There are some students, though, who don't seem to want to give you their best effort. No matter how positive and supportive you want to be about their writing, you reach a point where you have to tell them, "This is not good enough." Students should know when their writing needs to be improved. Even young writers need to know that you have certain expectations of them and that you care whether or not they meet these. (This year I've had to tell only two students that their work was not up to scratch; both of them went on to rewrite their work and produce much better writing.)

SOME FINAL REFLECTIONS

As I work with my grade one and two students, I am continually surprised by their abilities and their love of storytelling. Most take a great deal of pride in their work and love to share it with others. In fact, my grade ones often read their work to grade two students before sharing it with me. As well, the younger ones rely on the older students for help with spelling and grammar. Listening to the comments and suggestions that the students make to one another makes me feel like they are really learning about language. This is great! I guess after years of teaching at the junior and senior high school level and months spent at the primary level, the importance of turning kids on to language has become even clearer to me. It is a source of challenge and joy!

CHAPTER 2

Reflections from an Elementary Teacher/Principal

WESLEY OGINSKI

I Remember

I remember the last time I visited Baba. My grandmother is Ukrainian and we call her Baba, a Ukrainian word for grandmother.

Boy, is she ever Ukrainian. She is the epitome of Babahood. She bakes for her grandchildren, cans fruit and vegetables and makes the best *borscht* (beet soup), *holopchi* (cabbage rolls) and *putahe* (dumplings).

I used to live with her in the summer months. In fact, I have lived with her, on and off, for the last twenty-odd years.

When I was made a guardian of the court at sixteen, I felt cast adrift. My older brothers were on their own, while my younger brother and sister went to live with relatives. I was at that awkward teenage age nobody wanted to deal with, or so I thought. A place with friends of a relative was found, but it was not home.

Baba made it clear, her house would be home whenever I wanted or needed it. Hers was a place where I felt I belonged. I had a family when I needed it, and a haven from the outside world.

Baba sold her house last summer. She lives in the basement suite of a house owned by an uncle and an aunt. She will eventually move to a senior's complex.

I miss that house — but I miss my Baba even more.

I wrote these words during a Northland School Division workshop in 1992. They demonstrate how personal reflective writing enables us to examine our roots, our communities, our lives, and the connections that unite them.

As you read the piece, you will find a strong attachment to my cultural background. While I consider myself Canadian, I have a strong affinity with the Ukrainian roots of my family tree.

We all grow up with some cultural identity and traditions. They take form in how we spend the holidays or celebrate special events. Generally, we celebrate in the manner of our parents, and they of theirs, with modifications reflecting changes in lifestyle. However,

as children we may not truly comprehend why these events are celebrated in the way they are. I know as a child growing up, I never knew why. I did not ask. This was just the way our family did things.

As I grew older, I began to ask *why* questions. This led me through a journey of personal and cultural self-discovery. By examining the past of my family and the people they represent, I better understood my grandparents, parents, and myself. This was the personal "baggage" I brought into my personal writing. I also began to look for those elements in the writing of others.

Children can also be asked to express their personal baggage. All we need to do is ask the right questions. Personal writing requires the freedom to open one's self to examination. I am comfortable with modelling. I would never ask a student to try something I would not try myself. If we want students to open up to us, we must first show we can open up to them. Through an open dialogue, we and our students develop an honest relationship. When we as teachers share our revelations about ourselves, students will know it is safe to share theirs with us and with the rest of the class.

ABOUT WRITING

Before we write, we have to have ideas about what we want to say. These can come from our life experiences, the experiences of those who are close to us, and the stories we have listened to and read.

According to *Graves (1983), once we have an idea, we can explore it through writing. We may have to write a piece several times before it says what we want it to say. Some people write a draft that does not need many changes; others must write and rewrite. But after every draft, we need to edit. Writing is a public act meant for sharing with an audience, so we need to celebrate writing by publishing or sharing it. This helps writers develop a sense of audience. As Graves puts it, publication is the tangible outcome of the writing process.

*Graves, D. (1983). *Writing: teachers & children at work*. Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann.

FOCUS QUESTIONS

Focus questions are helpful. They establish parameters for composing. Some people have a difficult time simply being told, "This is writing time." They have no focus. They literally have nothing to write about. Focus questions help to provide starting strategies for writing. Focus questions, brainstorming, and story starters are useful in this regard as is material found in learning logs.

A year before writing *I Remember*, I used a similar exercise with a grade three/four/five class in Conklin, a small community southeast of Fort McMurray. I wanted to understand what the students value in their community. This exercise was triggered by a couple of elders visiting for a Remembrance Day ceremony in our school. Both spoke of growing up in Conklin. One spoke of being there when many were leaving to go to war. Another spoke about how things were before World War II and how things change. He also spoke of the community values back then and why he chose to leave home to fight overseas in a strange land.

Using this as a springboard, I wrote a short essay explaining how I felt about being new in Conklin. I wanted to provide an honest portrait of my feelings about living in a new and strange place. I used this essay as a model to motivate my students to describe their lives in Conklin.

Conklin, the end of the road. Really! On the road maps, the highway ends here. When you really get here, there are mazes of private roads and forestry roads crisscrossing, supplying oil companies and forestry workers with access to facilities around here.

My name is Wes, and I work in Conklin, at the local school. I moved from central Alberta, to this northern Metis community two hours away from Fort McMurray. The funny part is you have to go to Fort McMurray and then head south to Conklin.

Being single and available has made it tough living in this small community. There are about 170 people here. The only services are a general store, a fire hall, and the school.

The focus question I used with students was "Do you like being a young person in Conklin?" We listed their ideas on the chalkboard in point form. Students were then asked to write about how it feels to be a young person living in Conklin.

I was surprised by the honesty in some of the students' responses. I was impressed with their trust in me. As I reflect now, I wonder if their honesty would have been possible if I had not first provided them with my model and shared it with them openly.

Here are excerpts from three pieces of student writing provided in response to the focus question.

Rachel, Grade Five

Hi, my name is Rachel. I am 11 years old. I'm in grade five . . .

I was born in Fort McMurray. I got adopted by my grandparents and they raised me since I was a baby.

I am still living with them.

I will never leave them.

I love them with all my heart, but my mom still lives with us.

I moved to Conklin when I was 9 years old . . .

My birthday is on January 25 . . .

What I like about Conklin is when there is a dance. It is fun.

There is a lot of stuff happening here.

There's air bands, talent shows and the pot luck suppers . . .

I will always live here.

Tabitha, Grade Four

Hi, my name is Tabitha. I am nine years old.

I like Conklin because there's so much to do. I had a *mosom who went to the war and fought. He lives in Edmonton now. I wish I could go and see him . . .

He has his own house. I just like to hear him when he is telling a story about this one rhinoceros that came charging at a train. One part of the train fell over.

In Edmonton they have roller coasters and all kinds of rides. It is so (much) fun, I want to go to Edmonton on bumper cars . . .

*Cree word for grandfather

Rachel responded honestly to the focus question. I can see her strength and love for her family. She knows who she is and she knows her relationship to her family and community. Rachel does not worry about my reading about her strong affection for her grandparents. This is a feeling I also strongly identify with.

While Tabitha responded with descriptive comments rather than with emotional reactions, she was also honest. Her writing is clearly taking shape.

EDITING

An editing strategy I like to use is called *COPS in Mulcahy et al (1986, p. 78). COPS is an easy to remember set of items against which to check writing during the editing stage.

As I take students through the writing process, I present this strategy.

COPS is designed to help students examine each other's writing for:

- **Capitalization** (Check for capitals on names, important words, at the beginnings of sentences, etc.)
- **Organization** (Ask, "Does this make sense?" or "How can this make better sense?")
- **Punctuation** (Ask, "Are the periods, commas, question marks, etc. in the right places?")
- **Spelling** (Ask, "Are the words chosen spelled correctly?")

*Mulcahy, B., Marfo, K., Peat, D., & Andres, J. (1986). *Strategies program for effective learning and thinking*. Edmonton, Alberta: Cognitive Education Project, University of Alberta.

We review the basics of capitalization, punctuation, and spelling. However, we often need to spend time understanding what organization means. I use sequencing of recipes as an example of organization. If a person does not follow a recipe in the sequence provided, the product may not be edible. This makes sense to students who can decide if a piece of writing will make an edible product.

IN CONCLUSION

These are but a few general ideas on how to develop writing in your classroom. More ambitious projects could include book teams (two or more students team up to be author and illustrator), cumulative books (students add to a topic as the year or a theme progresses), and joint publications (teacher and student, or student teams develop a magazine).

Above all, it is important to provide young authors with role models. If we do not write, our students will be less motivated to do so. When teachers work closely with their students, they share the excitement of quality experiences and opportunities to write. I know I do!



Reflections from an Upper Elementary School Teacher

DOUGLAS ROSS

Writing requires a push or a pull to make it happen. Compare writing with mountain climbing. Climbers throw grappling hooks upward several times until the hook takes a grip. They pull themselves up to level ground where the walking is easier until the next precipice or point of challenge is reached.

WRITING PORTFOLIOS

I have been using writing portfolios in my classroom for the past five years with consistent, successful results. The following comments stem from my own study and practice.

The use of writing portfolios in the classroom is a key part of the development of writers. The portfolio is a safe place for both works-in-progress and students' completed writing. The purpose of portfolios is to provide for the preservation and communication of students' progress, struggles, writing strategies, and growth.

Portfolios are effective as a means of promoting student self-evaluation, sharing works-in-progress, and encouraging reflective practice in both producing and evaluating writing. As well, portfolios provide opportunities for the exhibition of student work to administrators, parents, and other teachers.

I like to personalize portfolios to make them as meaningful as possible. For example, I encourage students to build different sections into their portfolios and add colourful designs, initials, or pictures to the covers.

I like to place portfolios in a prominent yet safe location in the classroom. Displaying portfolios is a good lead-in to portfolio exhibitions. Portfolios can also be kept in cupboards or in filing cabinets as long as the rules for accessing them are understood and respected by students. I have a simple rule: Students work only with their own portfolios unless they are sharing the work of another student and have that student's permission to do so. Observing this rule demonstrates students' respect for the portfolios and safeguards their confidence in contributing to them.

The purpose of writing portfolios is to help improve student writing over time. Portfolios mirror students' progress. Their use allows students to share their writing with others in a meaningful way. As well, portfolios provide opportunities for teachers to respond to such questions about writing as: Where do matches occur in the perceptions of groups of students about a shared work? How do students feel about the role the writer has adopted? Do they agree on the emotional content of a piece of writing? Are students comfortable with the way the audience has been addressed?

I make sure that all pieces of writing in the portfolio are labelled. This helps to avoid misinterpretation when the contents of portfolios are being shared with parents or visitors to the classroom. When I place a piece of writing in a portfolio I note its stage of completion with such comments as "unfinished work," "work in progress (WIP)," "finished work," and "draft number ____."

I also feel it's important to date work in the portfolios. This lends a feeling of continuity to the writing process. The dates act as reference points for me and for students and remind students to consider such questions as: When was the last time a work was revised? What were my feelings then? What are my interests now? How has my writing changed?

THE COMPUTER AND PORTFOLIOS

The computer is the ideal tool for storing and retrieving files. It makes drafting, editing, and revising an interesting task for writers. The computer can be used to set up individual writing portfolios for students. Files can be kept by date, progress can be monitored, and longitudinal comparisons can be made.

Keeping things interesting is an important part of encouraging student writing.

One misconception about the computer is that it will automatically improve students' writing. However, the computer is only a tool that helps to enhance student output and experimentation with language. It lends itself to the development of such aspects of writing as coherence, clarity, and idea content; teachers must still teach the writing process.

PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT

Anecdotal records can be kept of students' progress as they wrestle with writing each day. These are short comments organized in block form with students' names written along the side of the page for easy record entry. Examples of comments are "struggles to write," "does thought-webbing well," "conference practice needed," and "on track." Anecdotal records promote reflective practice, especially in relation to what may be working and what may require change. Small notes designed to prompt and encourage students can be placed inside the portfolio. Carefully timed nudges from the teacher in verbal or written form can help ignite the full potential of the student writer.



The contents of portfolios should be assessed at periodic intervals. Both the product and the process are important in the assessment and both teachers and students should be involved in these aspects of assessment. This process encourages students to assume responsibility for their own learning.

Students should be encouraged to reflect on and assess their own writing during all its different stages of development. These results should be included in the teacher's assessment of students' writing and in notes that appear in the portfolio. Writing assessment should affirm students as writers and challenge them to become lifelong learners.

Peer evaluation sheets are also useful when students conference with each other about their writing. The success of these conferences can be evaluated by both teachers and students.

Positive reflective practices in the assessment of student work are an important means of improving student writing. During the assessment process it is essential to give the right words of encouragement to student writers. Instead of writing things like "good job" or "good work," I try to fit myself into a piece of writing by identifying with what a student is saying. Students already know what effort has gone into their written work. They appreciate this type of assessment because it is an attempt by the teacher to capture the essence of a piece of writing. As well, portfolios can be used as a contribution to a final grade.

WRITTEN IDEAS AND STRATEGIES

During the past ten years, many strategies and ideas for writing have been devised by skillful teachers. Here are a few that have worked for me:

- I place posters and pictures on classroom walls to motivate student writing. Pictures of faraway lands, castles, mountains, and countries all provide starting places for writing.
- To tap into students' creativity aspects, I discuss first impressions and how we form them. I often present a group of story starters in the form of one-line situations and see what kinds of explanations or stories they can suggest, based on the impressions they get from these. Students will bring what they know, their past experiences, feelings, and thoughts to the discussion. Students can also brainstorm to add their own one-line situations to the list.
- I have had a lot of success with giving students a variety of interesting choices to write about. Topics can be drawn from a hat or placed on the board or overhead projector. The students choose a topic and then answer a series of questions about it. Prior to answering the questions, I show students examples of thought-webbing and brainstorming techniques. Jotting down words and images that come to mind as well as drawing pictures provides students with the confidence needed to respond to the questions and get started on the writing.
- I use computer games such as *Oregon Trail* to provide a ready-made setting, goal, and series of possibilities for pieces of writing. *Oregon Trail* is an educational game set in the 1800s in which students are challenged to journey by wagon over rough terrain and respond to a number of challenges on the way to the end of the trail. Other educational computer games that students enjoy can also be stimulants for writing.



SHARING FROM THE TEACHER

Effective writing is the result of a natural flow of ideas. Writing rarely works when it is forced. The books I read provide the vocabulary for my writing and they contribute to my style as a writer. The subject must be interesting or challenging for the natural flow of ideas to take place. The writing flow can take on a magical quality when an author is fully involved with a set of ideas. Writing is no longer a task during these moments. This is when some of the best writing happens.

I've found that different writing strategies are required as classes change from year to year. It is still a surprise when a strong writing strategy doesn't work with a particular group of students!

I am encouraged when students produce writing that shows they are being both risk-takers and creative writers within a given framework. Student writing that conforms too much to what students think the teacher wants does not demonstrate either risk-taking or creativity. It leaves me with the impression that students are standing still with the writing process. To develop fully as writers, they need to be challenged by a variety of writing process approaches and must be encouraged to move away from the perceived safety of a single process.

I like to present students with as many writing ideas as possible before they engage in the writing process. I encourage students who are having trouble getting started by telling them to write down words on paper or draw a sketch of some of the things they are thinking about as they prepare to write. This is a friendly way to get students into the writing process.

When I write I like to be enthusiastic and interested in what I am writing about. I need a quiet place and time where thoughts that lead to good writing can develop. I also need a clear mind for writing and ideas and resources to keep my writing going.

I usually just write. When I've thought enough about the topic and I haven't had any interruptions that might put me off track, I find enough momentum to write a first draft. Momentum is a key aspect of my writing. I usually write a fairly good first draft. Writing has always been something that I have enjoyed doing. When I am teaching a writing lesson I try to include some of the elements that make my writing flow along with the basics of the writing process we are working with at that grade level.

SHARING FROM THE STUDENTS

Recently, I had an opportunity to discuss the writing process with two grade five students from Fort McKay School. Here are some of the insights that Anthony and Sherry shared with me.

Anthony

I wait five minutes and think about an idea first. Then I just write. The thinking happens a lot and I find writing to be easy. While I'm writing I'll think of ways to make my writing better. I'll finish the rough copy and go to an editor to check for mistakes. Then I will rewrite the rough copy.

We also discussed some of the things that might influence the process of writing.

Anthony

I like writing. My favourite kind of stories are action stories. I can write with loud music on or with lots of noise around me. I sometimes write during quiet times. I don't get stuck often. When I think about what I'm going to write I don't get stuck.

Sherry

Sometimes I get stuck with writing. When I write I think of stuff for a while. I think of a story that might be good . . . then I just write it down in rough.

Sherry

(discussing her story)

I picked Cindy for the title because it matches Cinderella. The teacher specified three or four pages but I did more. I did more because I was really interested in the story. I like fairy tales. I feel that this story is my best so far.

During writing conferences I discussed some areas of possible improvement with both Anthony and Sherry. I asked Anthony to provide more details in a story he had written about a turtle and to work on using more paragraphs. I took a similar approach with Sherry, showing her where the first paragraph break should be and then asking her to locate the rest on her own. She was able to do this fairly successfully. Anthony concentrated more on adding details to history in his third draft.

The students' main focus as they went from draft to draft was on correcting small errors. Both paragraphing and content development required teacher direction during our writing conferences. After viewing the students' final drafts I felt that both content development and the basics of paragraphing could have received even more emphasis during this writing journey.

IN CONCLUSION

Assisting in the development of students' writing requires patience, flexibility, and strategy. For teachers involved with students' writing the challenge of climbing the mountain may involve many changes in tack and approach before the level ground is reached. For students who scale the precipices in the process of becoming better writers there await both greater confidence in writing and the potential for greater accomplishments.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The administration on behalf of the Board of Trustees of Northland School Division No. 61 extends its appreciation to those individuals who assisted in the development and production of the Student Expressions Anthology and the Teacher's Resource Guide. A special thank you for their inspiration and support is extended to:

Education Committee—Diane Beck, Adele Carifelle,
Rick Hopfe, Kathy Lepine.

External Sources—Jennifer Bushrod (Alberta Education, Curriculum Standards Branch); Dr. Emma Plattor (Professor Emerita, University of Calgary); Dr. William Washburn (W.V. Washburn & Associates Ltd., University of Calgary).



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